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Media Debate  
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More recognizable than the senator, the representative, the local legislator—the entertainer; a face not hidden behind parties and policies, but rather plastered on television and across the World Wide Web—the entertainer. Political and media cross over is no new phenomena to the American public; there have been years of popular schemes (mostly facetious) placing charismatic television personalities in political offices, Governor Schwarzenegger, Oprah Winfrey for President, Stewart/Colbert '08. Thus, over the years, with so much cross-over between media and political giants and constant confrontation “*with the spectacle of the media-political complex, [where] the only possible response is laughter,*” (Smith, pg. 6), has comedy news enhanced political literacy of the average American?

Political columnist, Chris Smith's 2010 article entitled America Is a Joke, published by NY Magazine, outlines the ideological framework behind comedy news and political satire. Focusing on Jon Stewart and his role on the daily show (and as a comedian), Smith asserts that people like Stewart began using comedy in service of a larger point when “*The Daily Show became America's sharpest political satirists...*” (Smith, pg. 1) Airing in a nation that exists within a framework riddled with political scandal and personality, The Daily Show caters to the majority of viewers in a world where printed news has suffered and “*constant exposure to political much produces cynicism... [Where] confronted with the spectacle of the media-political complex, the only possible response is laughter.*” (Smith, pg. 6) Smith uses various quotes from Stewart to expose his position as both an entertainer and a comedian, and a sharp political profiler and analyst. Both Stewart and Colbert defends their positions of mockery saying that “*This is not a fragile country...this too shall pass.*” (pg. 2) and “*There has to be though behind every joke*” (pg. 3), respectively; clearly hoping that there is more to what they do and that it does in fact influence the public and their actions in advocacy of political awareness. Ultimately, Chris Smith leaves the reader with the idea (laid out by Stewart) that indeed comedy news may be spreading manure, but that it is that manure that is fertilizing the soil, preparing it for growth.

While Chris Smith is used to argue that yes, comedy news does increase literacy, it also notes that there has been a recent proliferation of opinions across the internet; this implies that perhaps the voices of Steven Colbert and Jon Stewart and the like are equally as valid that the average Joe ranting in his blog or his Facebook status. So many sources, all ranting and raving and joking and laughing, how is the average viewer expected to discern from the carefully crafted wit of an entertainer and the blasphemous opinion of the blogger. Which can be trusted to be based in fact—both? Neither? This argues that comedy and satire in the media equalizes all sources and not

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only does not advocate political and environmental literacy, but in fact enhances political and environmental *illiteracy*. Facts, quotes, and scenes are fragmented and taken out of context in the interest of humor, paralleling with the equally as fragmented propaganda media. Smith also likens politicians to actors and calls politicians and hosts “brothers” of showmen ship, diminishing the credibility of the entertainer, yes, but also diminishing the credibility of the politician.

“The ‘Jon Stewart Game’: Everyone Loses, Except Him”, written by Matt Welch, one year after Smith’s article praising satire and comedy news, details and quotes its way to the *“painful-to-watch problems of liberal political comedy in the age of Obama.”* Welch criticizes that *“comedian’s performances are [now] covered like a political event”* and that this reality can only undermine the importance of political involvement and in fact likens the entire system to a big joke. Democratic consultant, Kevin Wardally says of Stewart and Colbert, *“I find it very disturbing that people who say they really care about voting and making real change in D.C. will be taking thousands of people away for a comedy show, when they should be working in their respective communities to make sure that change comes in November.”* (*politico.com*) Welch, a libertarian berates liberal America for empowering people like Stewart and Colbert who have in turn created a following that draws viewers from following the political facts and news and subsequently defers action within a system that they clearly believe to be laughable at best.

Of the various suggested sources to argue against Colbert and Stewart as advocates of political action, all seem to express a certain anger and disdain with the laugh-ability of America’s political reality and those that play into it. However, with a demographic that religiously watches late-night television and flips past C-SPAN, PBS, and Press Conferences in the interest of sports television, or their latest binge-addiction, Colbert and Stewart have crafted a way to freeze the frame. The television stays on their channel. Even though this may not be the idealized form of political interest and awareness, in undeniably exposes the viewer to current events and policies that would utterly escape them otherwise. Perhaps it’s the reality of our impending idiocracy in place of democracy, but political satirists have managed to capture the attention of the apathetic like no politician or scientist can. Furthermore, in a world dominated by the virtual, increasing amounts of media exposure is happening exclusively online. When one is streaming instantly, surfing websites, and illegally torrenting, they are in control of the filter. Ads are catered to typical viewers of typical websites, search results reflect their best guess and what has been asked. In this world, this reality of [particularly] the younger generation of today, the public only has to know what they want to know. Perhaps satire and comedy is the way to reach the masses of who have chosen to believe that ignorance is bliss.

Ilyse Hogue, communications director for MoveOn.org said of political comedians such as Jon Stewart and Steven Colbert, *“...these guys reach an audience that’s high risk to sit this election out...it’s likely to get a younger, more apathetic*

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*electorate involved.*" (*Politico*) This remains true when it comes to the 'we' generation, the frighteningly apathetic twenty-something that 'justifies' a self-removal from the political process because they "don't follow politics" or doesn't "pay attention to that stuff," the same twenty-something that is over-whelmed by foreign affairs, political scandal, and emotionally charged voter issues from women's rights to gay marriage and subsequently paralyzed into inaction. The same twenty-something that grew up spending more hours than any other generation in front of a television, the first generation born into a world that housed the virtual within personal computers. The same twenty-something that sits in front of Tosh.0, Chelsea Lately, The Colbert Report, The Daily Show, Saturday Night Live and the like. With a willingness to watch—and enjoy—satire, comedy, and stio<sup>1</sup> which happen to, in recent years, follow political actions both domestic and abroad, it is inevitable that Comedy News enhances, and will continue to enhance, political and environmental literacy and awareness.

Clearly, it is quite literally up for debate on the role that comedy news, parody, satire and stio<sup>1</sup> will have on the effect of political and environmental literacy and thus voter turnout across the nation, particularly in younger generations—and the jury is still out. However, no matter which side of the debate you stand on, it is undeniable that media influences opinions and behavior, in both good and bad ways, and for better, for worse, people are watching.

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